DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 358 518 EA 024 928

AUTHOR Van Alfen, Curtis
TITLE School Board Policy as an Instrument of Empowering Leadership in America.
PUB DATE Mar 93
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference on Creating Quality Schools (2nd, Oklahoma City, OK, March 25-27, 1993).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Boards of Education; Elementary Secondary Education; Guidelines; Institutional Mission; *Leadership; *Mission Statements; *Participative Decision Making; *Policy Formation; School Community Relationship; Standards
IDENTIFIERS Empowerment

ABSTRACT

The role of school board policy as an instrument for empowering leadership is explored in this paper. Currently, the majority of policy handbooks are not designed to provide motivation or vision and are not part of an ongoing effort to create a congruence of district expectations. When policy becomes a statement of a school board's expectations and visions, rather than a tool for crisis management, it can serve as an instrument of leadership. For policy statements to become effective instruments of leadership and empowerment, they must be written to reflect the overall vision of the school board and participants. A conclusion is that to fulfill their roles, school boards, particularly those in rural communities, need to take active leadership roles, one of which is policy formation. To achieve district goals, policy handbooks must be reviewed, reformulated, and rewritten so that they embody the goals and ideals shared by the board and its constituents and are written in terms of "superobjectives"--that is, objectives that go beyond the surface concerns which dominate the average policy handbook or guide and give coherence and meaning to the leader's performance. (LMI)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED358518

School Board Policy as an Instrument of Empowering Leadership in America

by

Curtis Van Alfen Ed.D.
Professor of Educational Leadership
McKay Building
Brigham Young University
Provo, Utah 84602

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

✓ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

C. Van Alfen

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

EA 024 928

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

School Board Policy as an Instrument of Empowering Leadership in America

In a time of close scrutiny of education and anticipation of its influence on future generations, critics and supporters alike must consider the leadership roles of the various participants. Since local boards of education have emerged as legally constituted leaders of the local school systems, their role has received considerable attention.

Through their policy- making role, boards of education must learn to establish their position of leadership. As part of their role definition, they must learn to involve all participants-- community, business and professional-- reaching out and investing in people through a participative and ongoing policy. Such policy, correctly implemented, generates motivation and empowerment rather than a restriction and control. Through their closeness to local businesses and prospective community participants, school boards in America have a unique opportunity to develop participative policy as an instrument of leadership.

If policy is to be an instrument of leadership by the board of education, it must be perceived by the participants as such. Effective use of policy should "induce a group to take

action according to the leaders' purposes or shared purposes of all" (Gardner, 1986).

To accomplish this objective, policy formulated by rural boards of education should be targeted to the following goals:

1. Policy should represent a longer term perspective beyond the day's crisis, beyond the quarterly report and beyond the horizon.
2. Policy should represent a perspective, enabling participants to grasp its relationship to larger realities.
3. Policy should reach and influence constituents beyond the narrow boundaries and jurisdictions of a single district.
4. Policy should rise above such jurisdictions, binding together the fragmented constituencies that must work together to solve problems.
5. Policy should put heavy emphasis on the intangibles of vision, values and motivation.
6. Policy development should become a process adaptable to the reality of ever-changing environments.
7. Policy, as an instrument of leadership, should be central in creating a congruence of expectations.

Policy statements as they are currently written

School board policy has the potential to unify vision and perspective and to provide a context for leadership, particularly in a rural school district. However, handbooks, the vehicles by which policy is conveyed, are typically repositories of instructions for control and crisis management. The following statements are representative.

> Parental Waiver
>
> Parents are to be given the opportunity to review proposed alternatives to fee waivers and to appeal waiver decisions to the board of education or its designee.

> Violation of this Policy
>
> Violation of the policy statement 2.13 by any employee will be the basis for disciplinary action which will be conducted in accordance with established personnel practices and may include such penalty as official reprimand, suspension without pay, or dismissal.

Most policy handbooks reviewed contained from one thousand to three thousand fragmented one-paragraph policy statements. If these policy statements are to become instruments of leadership, we must redirect our thinking.

The thinking of practicing administrators and teachers, as reflected in current research, shows the limited view demonstrated by the handbooks. Typical responses from professionals to the question Do you use your policy handbook to direct your daily decisions? were as follows:

> "I use it to help with crisis situations. I use it when parents are upset and I need support. Otherwise, I don't ever use it."
>
> "It doesn't seem designed to be an influence on the day--to-day function. It doesn't seem designed to provide any vision."
>
> "You need policy sometimes because if it's not the rule, people won't do it."
>
> "I use the policy handbook every day. You see, I'm short, and my legs don't touch the floor when I sit. It is just thick enough for me to put on the floor so I can support my feet."

It is evident that, at the present time, the majority of policy handbooks are not designed to provide motivation or vision and are only used as crutches, clubs, or foot supports. They are not a part of an on-going effort to provide a congruence of expectations for a district.

Policy As an Instrument of Leadership

The National School Board Association (1988) defines a policy as an "idea with power." It further describes policy as follows:

> It is better to think of a policy as an idea designed to bring action. A statement of policy is built on an expectation, on a hope, on a dream. 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself' is a great policy in its purest form. We are familiar with the following Constitutional policy that gives direction to our governmental bodies: 'To establish justice, ensure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare...' Policy is "an idea with power."

Thus policy statements need to be thought of as ideas that should stimulate and create vision. Tichy and Devanna (1986) refer to vision as "the ideal to attain." Vision releases energy and motivates action. Similarly Bennis (1986) referred to vision as the art form of leadership; including among its functions (1) creating focus, and (2) engaging people's imaginations in the pursuit of its ideals.

Block (1987) points out two conditions that are necessary for vision to operate effectively: (1) an element that keeps it focused and expresses the role it plays in the organization's specific mission, and (2) a capacity "to capture minds," to

engage the spiritual dimension of its participants. Block sees vision as capturing the ideal, as comprising the deepest expression of the values and wants of its participants.

If we relate these statements to Gardner's definition of policy, the role of policy seems to become synonymous with the leadership role of the board of education.

When policy becomes a statement of a board's expectations, of its hopes and visions, it can serve as an instrument of leadership. During the development of policy people in the organization attribute significance to day-to-day processes and practices. Through policy development, those who work together develop a congruence of perception. As they establish greater congruence, they strengthen relationships, facilitate communication and further the administrative processes. When educators have established the point of view that policy development is a process of creating common expectations, they can then begin to use the resulting policy as an instrument of leadership.

Policy as an Instrument of Empowerment

When policy objectifies the goals and expectations of a school board and extends those visions to include the participation of individuals, sustained renewal can begin to take place. Thus when we have established the role of policy

as an instrument of leadership, we can begin to consider it also as an instrument to empower participants in unified efforts to strengthen schools. Empowerment must result in a collective effort, an on-going process in which everyone involved can play a significant role.

In any school-community, particularly in rural districts where a greater proportion of the people are directly involved, all individuals must feel they play a contributing part. Work takes on meaning as individuals working together develop a more congruent set of values and expectations. As the process matures, the individual participants and the school board as leader attribute similar significance to more and more aspects of the program. Thus the individual and the organization move together to fulfill congruent expectations. As expectations become more congruent and activity becomes unified, the level of trust improves. As trust improves, the climate or culture of the organization is enhanced. As the climate is enhanced, empowerment is more freely given and more responsibly accepted by all stakeholders in the educational enterprise.

Leaders who strive to empower others find that as they build trust, and as the people they serve become more empowered, their leadership becomes strong. As this process of empowerment progresses, people begin to believe they are an integral part of an educational community and the quality of

their educational system is in their own hands. The values of the organization and the individual participants' values become aligned. Each indiviudal's commitment becomes more personal and at the same time more consistent with the group's overall visions and goals.

The educational organization thus becomes a valued part of the individual's sense of community. Gardner (1986, p. 7) states:

> If we look at ordinary human communities, we see the same reality: a community lives in the minds of its members--in shared assumptions, beliefs, customs, ideas that give meaning, ideas that motivate. And among the ideas are norms or values. . . But every healthy society celebrates its values.

Empowerment is more than delegation of authority. Empowerment is a process of leadership leading to a celebration of shared values within the organization. Leaders strive for shared assumptions, beliefs, customs, and ideas that give meaning. With such consistency, distributed power becomes a strength, not a risk.

Policy Statements as They Should Be Written

For policy statements to become effective instruments of leadership and empowerment, they need to be written so that

they reflect overall visions, hopes and dreams of the school board and participants. They need to reflect the "big picture," rather than fragments that at best can be extracted to control in a crisis. Travers suggests the term superobjective for statements that thus represent objectives beyond the surface concerns which dominate the average policy handbook or guide:

> The superobjectives give coherence and meaning to the leader's performance. The acquisition of super-objectives is just as important an aspect of leaders' training as the acquisition of specific skills. A leader who acquires only the specific skills is like an actor who has learned his lines but who does not understand the part (p. 29).

Conclusion

In order to fulfill the roles assigned to them in today's educational structure, the school boards, particularly those in rural communities, need to take active leadership roles. One of the most significant of these roles is that of policy formulation.

But the most common vehicle of policy, the handbook, is generally a compilation of fragmented rules and procedures designed to provide a code that can be used occasionally in crisis management. Few school boards use policy development in the way that it has the potential to be used: as an instrument

for gathering goals and expectations into a consistent vehicle for leadership and as an instrument for empowering all participants in the educational enterprise to act together to achieve their common objectives.

To achieve these goals, policy handbooks must be re-viewed, re-formulated and re-written. Policy must be viewed beyond codes for management of crises and disputes. Policy must be formulated to embody the goals, ideals and purposes shared by the board and its constituents. Policy must be written in terms of superobjectives that will state those visions in terms that will unite all stakeholders in education in common perspective and purpose.

References

Bennis, W. & Nanus, B. (1985) Leaders: The strategies for taking charge. New York: Harper & Row.

Block, P. (1987) The empowered manager. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc.

Gardner, J. W. (1986) The Tasks of Leadership. Washington D. C.: Independent Sector

The National School Boards Association. (1988) The school administrators guide to the EPS, policy development system.

Travers, R. M. W. & Dillon, J. (1975) The making of a teacher: A plan for professional self-development. New York: McMillan Publishing Co., Inc.